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ABSTRACT

A study investigated who students think of when they are faced with the issues of relationships during a basic communication course--their friends from high school, their new friends from college, a parent, or a sibling. Subjects, 70 women and 41 men enrolled in a hybrid basic communication course, completed a relationship questionnaire. Results indicated that both male and female subjects submitted a same-sex friend as the most frequent description of the person to whom they were closest, and 59% of the subjects said they had been closest to this person for under five years, indicating the fluctuation present in the college student's social structure. Results also indicated that (1) males selected sports and hobbies as topics of conversation at a higher percentage than did females; (2) females reported a greater use of the topic of shared activities than did males; (3) men, more than women, indicated they discussed attitudes towards particular social issues; and (4) males indicated a greater propensity to discuss religion that did females. Future research will focus more in-depth on the issue of gender of participant and selection of topic. (Contains 30 references and two tables of data. The relationship questionnaire is attached.) (Author/RS)

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ED 379 716

A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF

RELATIONSHIPS OF BASIC COURSE STUDENTS

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A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF RELATIONSHIPS OF BASIC COURSE STUDENTS

Abstract

When a student is faced with the issues of relationships during a basic communication course, who do they think of: their friend from high school, their new friends from college, a parent, or a sibling? This investigation examined the first and second closest relationships as described by 111 students enrolled in a hybrid basic communication course. Both male and female subjects submitted a same-sex friend as the most frequent description of the person to whom they were closest. Fifty-nine percent of the subjects indicated they had been closest to this person for under five years, indicating the fluctuation present in the college student's social structure. Topics discussed within the relationships were also investigated.

A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF RELATIONSHIPS OF BASIC COURSE STUDENTS

Central to the notion of interpersonal communication is the concept of relationship adjustments. Adjustments in one's communication patterns and behaviors are necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of the individual communication situation. Yet, for many human relationships, the goal established may be one of simply "being" and cannot be measured in terms of costs, benefits and other goal/agenda setting rituals.

What are the interpersonal communication relationship concerns of the students enrolled in our Basic Communication Courses? Most instructors would agree upon the fact that students are in the class in order to complete the necessary (usually required) hours for attainment of the degree. A hybrid course endeavors to cover the realm of possible communication contexts through discussion of one-on-one interaction, small group settings, and public speaking. A performance based evaluation is convenient for the latter two situations, but evaluating one-on-one interaction is complex. The central question posed by this paper is "What are the primary relationships that the basic course student is involved in at the present time and how might we adjust our teaching to increase the applicability to our student's lives?"

At this time in their lives, many students are encountering a tremendous upheaval in their social structure. The recent graduate who enters college immediately out of high school has left an organization of relationships behind and is propelled into a new social and educational environment. Even the non-traditional student is faced with this profound change in social

schemata. A basic premise of all postulates of relationship development and termination is that proximity to the other is an immense determinant of that development or termination. This premise is especially applicable to the new college student, young or old, who experiences a deterioration of an established social system and is faced with the formation of a new structure.

Instruction in the interpersonal segment of a hybrid course can be greatly enhanced by a clear examination of a student's perceptions of their own interpersonal relationships. This paper first presents a selection of various definitions of interpersonal communication offered by hybrid text written for the Basic Course. Secondly, the issues of relationships, friendships and developments are examined in the light of research on self-disclosure. Finally, this paper presents information collected from 95 students in the Basic Course at a small midwestern college which looked at the student's perceptions of their close relationships.

The following definitions of interpersonal communication suggest several common threads. Barker and Barker (1993) define interpersonal communication as "Informal, spontaneous, loosely organized exchange of messages between two or more people to achieve some goal" (p. 450). Hybels and Weaver (1992) specify that it is "...on a one-to-one basic--usually in an informal, nonstructured setting" (p. 422). Brooks and Heath (1993) applying a more impersonal attitude suggest that interpersonal communication consists of, "One or more persons engaged freely and directly with each other in overt and covert transmission and reception of messages (p. 380).

Offering a developmental definition, Gouran, Miller and Wiethoff (1992) state "Communication in which people interact over an extended period of time, and in which the interaction is adapted to the other as a unique individual, rather than communication in which actors play out well-defined roles, such as waiter and customer" (p. 465). The uniqueness theme

is also conveyed by Adler and Rodman (1991), "Communication in which the parties consider one another as unique individuals rather than as objects. It is characterized by minimal use of stereotyped labels; unique, idiosyncratic social rules and a high degree of information exchange" (p. 458). Berko, Wolvin and Wolvin (1992) refer to "communication in which the participants exchange feeling and ideas" (p. 5). Pearson and Nelson (1994) look at "the personal process of understanding and sharing meaning between ourselves and at least one other person when relatively mutual opportunities for speaking and listening occur...Through our interpersonal communication, we are able to establish relationships with others that include friendships and romantic relationships" (p. 17-18).

Several concepts are conveyed through this sample display of definitions. Uniqueness, spontaneous and mutual are three that form the basis for the conceptualizations presented in this paper. If viewed as unique, non-rule governed, unplanned opportunities, the performance issue of interpersonal relationships takes central stage. How can an instructor in the basic course be expected to grade a student on their interpersonal behavior? One method of grading this area in the past has been through the use of interviews. Yet, is the interview a true gauge of understanding of relational concerns? It is interesting to note than in the text cited previously, two, Pearson and Nelson (1994) and Barker and Barker (1993) have both reduced the importance preceding editions applied to the interview. Both texts offer an appendix on interviewing techniques, and briefly mention the notion of interviewing when discussing evidence collection for public speaking. The other texts all present chapters on interviewing which allow for a public grading in an area classified as spontaneous and unique.

The previous question, "How can we grade?" should be now amended to "Must we grade

a performance?" Is it adequate for a Basic Course to grade understanding of course material without the performance equivalent? The stance presented here is a resounding affirmative to understanding without the necessity of behavioral performance. To justify this stance, this paper will first look at the relative importance individuals apply to their interpersonal communication relationships.

The popular media offers insights into the general populations' attitudes towards relationships, specifically friendships. A MCI/Louis Harris survey, cited in USA Today (1993) asked people how many friends they have. One percent indicated no friends; 2% responded with one friend, 36% claimed to have two to five friends; 25% felt they had six to 10 friends; 18% responded that they had eleven to twenty friends; and 18% claim to have more than twenty friends. Obviously, a large percentage of the population believe they have developed a network of many individuals to designate as friends. Reporting on their survey of Canadian teenagers, Bibby and Posterski (1992) measured "what teenagers want...their valued goals." Surveying 4000 teens, they found that friendship was the second highest goal desired, 84%, second only to freedom.

Lopate (1993) claims friends "offer the noblest and most delightful of gifts." Writing a forward to this article the editor states, "Despite the importance of our friendships, we generally take them for granted, giving our best time and attention to family, lovers, and jobs, fitting friends in between the cracks, assuming they'll still be there for us when we need them."

The use of the terms relationships and friendships conjures up similar emotional responses in more scholarly literature. "Our greatest moments of joy and sorrow are founded in relationships" (Duck, 1985, p. 655). "Life without friends would be empty (Adler and Rodman,

1992, p. 211). "The frustrations and delights of friendship emerge during childhood and continue throughout life" (Rawlins, 1992, p. 5). These examples could continue endlessly, especially if a historical perspective was applied to discern the tracking of the conception of friendships since the writings of Aristotle, who wrote quite a bit on the area of friendships and the search for the "perfect friendship."

Within the contexts of these definitions, a pattern emerges. Relationships involving friends are central to daily existence; yet, the time and energy applied to these friendships, both in maintaining and researching, has been limited. The understanding of the elements applicable to relationships such as these can be of fundamental importance to students in a Basic Course.

Pivotal to the issue of relationship or friendship development is the issue of self-disclosure . This issue is of concern in development of friendships at a young age. Rotenberg and Whitney (1992) questioned 6th and 7th graders on issues of self-disclosure and friendships. They determined that loneliness seems to be connected to less developmentally advanced disclosure patterns. Thus, by the age of twelve or thirteen, the willingness to self-disclose is an important issue. The gender difference issue was reported by Clark and Ayers (1993). In their findings, they report that 7th and 8th graders had definite patterns reflecting gender differences. Females in these middle school years expected more from their close friendships, and were more likely to relate more intimacy and therefore engage in more self-disclosure than males.

For adults involved in all types of relationship development, self-disclosure is central to the enhancement of relationship development. Following the Altman and Taylor (1973) Social Penetration Theory,

...relationships are predicted to move from superficial to more intimate areas of

> interpersonal exchange as individuals get to know one another. Individuals are expected to react positively to other's ; and, in turn, people are willing to disclose personal information about themselves. (p. 173).

Self-disclosure, in general, refers to information concerning the self, whether it be feelings, attitudes, or information concerning past or future plans or events. Specifically, studies of self-disclosure characteristically track the progression of the disclosure from a cosmetic to a confidential level, paralleling a predilection for reciprocity.

Jones (1991) found that for both males and females the most significant factors associated with friendship satisfaction were mutual levels of self-disclosure and trust development. Steele (1991) confirms the trust issue with the stipulation that females will self-disclose more, therefore will develop more trust, than males. This recent research confirms numerous previous studies that found that females self-disclose more than males (see, for example: Cozby, 1973; Reis, Senchak and Solomon, 1985; and Walker and Wright, 1976). Cozby (1973) particularly notes the predominance of intimate self-disclosure by females as compared to males. Reis, Senchak and Solomon (1985) conclude that men's interactions with other men were in most cases less intimate, intimacy defined in terms of personal revealment, and meaningfulness.

Issues of trust and self-disclosure are also connected with issues of emotional socialization. Intimacy, as associated with relationship development and maintenance, is a cause for consternation when appraising gender issues. Sarason, Levin, Basham and Sarason (1983) conclude that women tend to develop a larger support system than men. An analogy offered by Wright (1982) provides an appropriate view: males tend toward side-by-side relationships and females gravitate toward face-to-face connections. This analogy can be seen even in very young

children, where two young boys will sit side-by-side during a conversation, whereas two young girls will turn their chairs into the other (Tannen, 1990).

Derlega (1984) concludes that these risks may, in part, explain the decreased level of intimacy in self-disclosure by males. This applies directly to the face-to-face versus side-by-side analogy offered by Wright (1982). Walker and Wright (1976) examined the path of friendship development and the connection of this path to gender and self-disclosure. Both male and female pairs claimed an increased likelihood of further acquaintance in the presence of more intimate levels of self-disclosure. However, their study was hindered by a lack of male willingness to self-disclose on this more intimate level. The researchers had to recruit an additional fifty percent for the male population in order to obtain the necessary number to complete the experiment. "In other words, men who disclosed intimate things about themselves became better friends if they ever overcame their reluctance to engage in intimate self-disclosure. None of the women in the experiment showed a similar reluctance.." (p. 741).

Derlega, Winstead, Wong and Greenspan (1987) found consistent with previous research, that women provided more intimate disclosures than men. One should examine the operational definition of intimacy before making definite conclusions about this area. Subjects in this project were asked to write highly intimate notes to friends. Intimacy was operationalized in terms of a previous scoring of intimacy, which presents intimacy as a one-dimensional concept, not as a transactional conduit within an individualized relationship. To explain this disparity in intimacy, researchers have considered the emotional substance of the male gender role as opposed to the female gender role in our society. Rubin, Hill, Peplau and Dunkel-Schetter (1980) concluded that women will seek this emotional support in other women whereas men tend to rely on romantic

partners. Concluding the results of friendship studies, Hendrick (1988) states, "In general, males are more oriented towards engaging in joint activities, whereas females are more oriented towards sharing emotional activities."

Gorcyca (1993) critically examined these issues of intimacy in self-disclosure as related to gender differences. For most studies cited in this paper, the question of intimacy has been handled by asking subjects to distinguish between self-disclosure statements on the question of intimacy. However, this method does not take into account the participants' perception of the relationship with corresponding perception of risk and trust development. This stationary notion of self-disclosure does not allow for a transactional explanation of self-disclosure and relationships adjustments.

This present research is an attempt at identification of a student's close relationships. Who are they: same-sex or opposite sex friends, family, co-workers? How long has the relationship been established? What topics are they most likely to discuss? And finally, how intimate would the person classify the relationship?

METHODS

Subjects

Subjects in this investigation were 111 (70 women and 41 men) undergraduate students enrolled in a hybrid basic speech communication course. The small midwestern college has an enrollment of approximately 5,000 students.

The ages of the subjects ranged from 18 to 51 with a mean age of 21.171. The sample consisted of 64 freshmen (61%), 14 sophomores (12.6%), 17 juniors (15.3%) and 12 seniors (10.8%). 82% (91 count) reported they were single, 7.2% (8) indicated they were married,

1.8% (2) reported they were divorced, and 9% (4) indicated other, which in all cases they specified as engaged.

Thirty-five (31.5%) of the subjects reported they did not work, 11 (9.9%) indicated they work from 1 to 10 hours per week, and 62 (55.9%) indicated they work more than ten hours per week.

Data Collection

Students in a junior level Interpersonal Communication course were asked to select five topics they frequently discussed with their close friends (close relationships). They selected from a list of topics compiled from the previous research of self-disclosure cited above. The list of their selections was compiled and the students were again asked to rank the top ten topics that they would likely discuss. These ten topics (plus other) were then compiled for the survey used in this present experiment. During the third week of the semester, 111 subjects enrolled in the basic communication course completed the relationship questionnaire which is presented in Appendix A.

Analysis of Data

Data was analyzed using SPSS-PC, 1992 version. A standard confidence level of .05 was adopted for this research; however, much of the research is of a descriptive nature and did not require confidence internals.

RESULTS

Intimacy

Females did perceive their primary relationship to be more intimate than males ($t = 2.55$, p .02). The mean rating for intimacy (1 being most intimate, 7 being nonintimate) was 2.69 for males and 1.8 for females. The second closest relationship as described by the subjects did not result in a significant difference on intimacy level (3.17 for males; 2.71 for females; $t = 1.37$).

The intimacy perceived in the primary or closest relationship significantly correlated with the intimacy perceived in the second relationship ($r = .473$, p .000).

Length

Sixteen (16%) percent of the respondents indicated they have been involved in their closest relationship for under one year. Forty three (43%) percent had been in this relationship for one to five years, 13.5% for five to ten years, and 26.1% for more than ten years. The second closest relationship also demonstrated this length variation. Twenty four (24%) percent had known this person for under one year, 25% for one to five years, 14.4% for five to ten years and 35.1% for ten or more years.

The t-test for differences between means on length separated by gender did not result in significant differences. Length of the closest relationship and length of the second closest relationship did not result in a significant correlation ($r = .1135$). Length of the closest relationship and intimacy also did not achieve a significant correlation ($r = .159$). However, when asked to describe the intimacy of the second closest relationship, a significant correlation

(r= -.2274, p .01) demonstrated the longer the relationship had existed, the more intimate it was described.

Topics

Table I presents the results of the topic selection by both males and females.

TABLE I: Topics selected for both relationships

Topic	Selected by males	Selected by females
My/their successes/failures	82%	70%
My/their attitudes towards particular social issues	53%	25%
My/their relationships with others	85%	109%*
Religion	34%	13%
Our activities that we share	28%	59%
Sports and other entertainment issues	43%	23%
My/their hobbies and other interests	34%	23%
My/their feelings of self-worth or lack of	22%	62%
My/their future plans and goals	92%	85%
Problems in work, family, school	100%	117%
Other	2%	7%

*Some percentages may total over 100% since they were to select the top three topic areas for both relationships.

Friends

Subjects were asked to identify their close relationships based on eleven categories. The results are presented in Table II.

Table II: Relationship Identification

Description	Selected by males	Selected by females*
Same sex friend	73%	81%
Opposite sex friend	75%	62%
Spouse	7%	5%
Mother	17%	21%
Father	7%	3%
Sister	10%	10%
Brother	2%	3%
Other Relative	2%	5%
Roommate	5%	7%
Co-worker	0%	0%
Other	0%	0%

*Columns may total over 100% since subjects were asked to describe their two closest relationships.

DISCUSSION

These results offer insight into the student who may enroll in a basic communication course. The interpersonal relationships as defined by students as "close" or "intimate" can serve as a focal point for lecture and discussions. Several areas offer significant findings on the treatment of relationships as presented in the basic course. First, the length of the relationship adds positive support for the notion of impact of proximity on relationship development. The closest relationship was described by 16% as existing under one year and by an additional 43% as existing under five years. This large percentage demonstrates the changing nature of one's relationships. There was somewhat increased stability concerning the second closest relationship, but this is a very small difference. This result indicates the value of discussion of relationship development, interpersonal attraction, and other related areas in the basic course.

The intimacy level is also a significant area for identification of the basic course student's relationships. Females rated their closest relationship as more intimate than did the males, but the second closest relationship did not result in a significant difference. A societal issue might be brought into question here. For this research, intimacy was defined as "a process of coming to know the other." Given the fact that males chose fewer same sex friends than did females, and more opposite sex friends than females, a cultural expectation of intimacy as a physical definition may endure. Future research should be conducted to explore this definitional dilemma.

The topics selected for discussion with the other brought about some engrossing results. Foremost, there was a confirmation of previous research which indicates that males converse more in terms of sports and other activities. Males selected the two topics (sports and other entertainment issues; my/their hobbies and other interests) at a higher percentage than did the females. However, females did report a greater use of the topic of shared activities (59%) than did the males (28%). Future research should determine the perceptual differences for these three groupings. It may be the case that all three are essentially the same issue, but males share the sports arena and females share other activities. The resulting level of intimacy and self-disclosure would therefore not be a concern.

Two other topics also provided interesting avenues for future research. Men, more than women, indicated they discussed attitudes towards particular social issues. An interesting question for projected research would be to determine the gender difference on the perceived importance of social concerns and knowledge of current events. The second topic which highlights a fundamental issue was the selection on the area of religion. Males indicated a greater propensity to discuss this topic (34%) than did females (13%). The changes in relationships structures may

be highly influential in this topic selection. The nominal nature of the data precluded further statistical exploration. Future research will determine a propensity to discuss each topic.

The identification of the choice of "closest relationships" also yielded interesting results. As expected, a predominant percentage of females (81%) chose a same sex friend as one of the two people to whom they are close. Males, however, choose a fairly high same sex percentage (73%). There was a small percentage difference in opposite sex friends, 75% for males and 62% for females, which warrants further description of these categories. Anecdotally, most of the females who indicated an opposite sex friend indicated in the other category that this was their fiance or boyfriend. None of the males felt the need for further identification of this relationship. Future descriptive research needs to further explore the full description of these relationships.

Few subjects chose roommates or co-workers. This was likely an artifact of the testing instrument. Subjects were asked to identify the person, but the instructions did not ask the student to mark all the descriptives that were applicable. Therefore, subjects may likely have marked the category, same-sex friend, as the salient characteristic, and did not feel the need to also mark if this person was a co-worker or roommate. For that reason, no definite statements can be made regarding this lack of selection of roommates and co-workers as close relations with this set of subjects. This could have been especially interesting with this subject pool, since 55.9% reported they work more than ten hours per week.

The student who typically enrolls in a Basic Communication Course is likely experiencing a period of adjustment in terms of relationships. The present subject sample was selected from a small college with relatively few on-campus students (less than 17%). Thus, many of these students live at home due to financial considerations. This is an essential demographic

characteristic that was not included in this present investigation. However, at colleges and universities with a higher percentage of on-campus housing, the development of new relationships and consequently the change in existing relationships may be an even more salient issue to the student.

Future research plans will focus more in-depth on the issue of gender of participant and selection of topic. Intimacy as a definitional variable will also be explored. The cultural ramifications must be examined to determine if there is in fact a gender difference in perceptions of relationships. These present results do provide a preliminary sketch of relationship development and evaluation. New relationships are central to a college student's life, and an understanding of issues can ease the anguish of termination and the fear of initializing. This author has been employing such an approach during the past seven years of teaching a hybrid basic course. Research is presently in progress to measure the evaluation of this approach. Central to this favorable rating is the concept of applicability. The issue of topic choice will be a supplementary benefit to instruction The examples presented to the students may be more relevant if some are selected from this inventory of student-selected issues.

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Age____ Sex____

Classification: _Freshman _Sophomore _Junior _Senior

Marital Status: _single _married _divorced _other_____

Work: _0 hrs/week _1-10 hrs/week _10 or more

PART I: Identify the person with whom you feel you have the closest personal relationship or friendship, in terms of willingness to talk about yourself.

Is this person:

___same sex friend
___opposite sex friend
___spouse
___mother
___father
___sister
___brother
___other relative
___roommate
___co-worker
___other (please identify)_____

How long have you had a relationship with this person?

___less than one year
___one to five years
___five to ten years
___ten or more

What are you most likely to discuss with this person?
Please check three of the following:

___my/their successes/failures
___my/their attitudes towards particular social issues
___my/their relationships with others
___religion
___our activities that we share
___sports and other entertainment issues
___my/their hobbies and other interests
___my/their feelings of self-worth or lack of
___my/their future plans and goals
___problems in work or family or school
___other (please specify)_____

Intimacy is defined as a process of coming to know the other. Please rate the above relationship:

Intimate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Nonintimate

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PART II: Identify the person with whom you feel you have the NEXT closest personal relationship or friendship, in terms of willingness to talk about yourself.

Is this person:

___same sex friend
___opposite sex friend
___spouse
___mother
___father
___sister
___brother
___other relative
___roommate
___co-worker
___other (please identify)_____

How long have you had a relationship with this person?

___less than one year
___one to five years
___five to ten years
___ten or more

What are you most likely to discuss with this person?
Please check three of the following:

___my/their successes/failures
___my/their attitudes towards particular social issues
___my/their relationships with others
___religion
___our activities that we share
___sports and other entertainment issues
___my/their hobbies and other interests
___my/their feelings of self-worth or lack of
___my/their future plans and goals
___problems in work or family or school
___other (please specify)_____

Intimacy is defined as a process of coming to know the other. Please rate the above relationship:

Intimate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Nonintimate

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